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Perspective

A forum—ideas, analysis, opinion

James Baker has big things in mind

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Like other Texas politicians, James A. Baker III has never thought small.

One of the reasons Baker is swapping the power and influence of his job as White House chief of staff for a Cabinet portfolio is that he's got national political ambitions of his own. And few people ever got elected to anything from the White House staff.

John F. Kennedy's top aides, Theodore Sorensen, Pierre Salinger and Kenny O'Donnell, discovered that the late president's magic touch wasn't transferable. All three were losers when they sought political office after JFK's death.

While Gerald Ford's able White House chief of staff, Richard Cheney, managed to get himself elected to Congress after leaving the White House, Baker has somewhat bigger things in mind. At some point in his political future, he would like to be president or vice president.

Most former White House aides capitalize on their experience by making piles of money in the private sector. Clark Clifford, who served Harry Truman, became one of the wealthiest lawyers in Washington. Jim Hagerty, Dwight Eisenhower's press secretary, became a network vice president, and Donald Rumsfeld, Ford's onetime chief of staff, became chief executive officer of G.D. Searle Co. But Baker, the scion of an old Texas family that made its fortune in the oil business, is already so wealthy that he finds little challenge in making more money.

Few people play a better political game. Beginning as an outsider in the Reagan administration, Baker became the most influential White House chief of staff since World War II, the principal architect of Reagan's legislative triumphs in the first term, and chief strategist of his landslide 1984 re-election. Much to the displeasure of the GOP's right wing, Baker won his power struggles with such longtime Reagan aides as William Clark and Edwin J. Meese.

Next to the President, Baker is generally considered the most influential policymaker in Washington. But for all of his successes, Baker was anxious to run his own shop. This week he finally got his chance.

As secretary of the treasury, Baker will be able to step out from President Reagan's shadow and have more success in establishing his own political identity. Another Texan, John B. Connally, who ran the Treasury Department during the Nixon administration, showed such a flair for public relations in the job that he became a serious presidential contender almost

overnight. Eisenhower's secretary of the treasury, Robert B. Anderson, another Texan, was Ike's personal favorite for the presidency in 1960.

The only other Cabinet-rank jobs in which Baker had been interested were secretary of state, secretary of defense, attorney general and director of the Central Intelligence Agency. But those slots were filled, with little prospect for change, and so Baker grabbed the opportunity when Donald Regan spoke with him about switching jobs.

As treasury secretary, Baker will be more visible than he was as Reagan's chief aide. He'll get high-profile coverage whenever he testifies before Congress, and he'll be a regular guest on all those morning interview programs. Without great effort, Baker will be able to bump most of the 1988 presidential hopefuls from a show if he wants to say something.

For the immediate future, Baker can be counted as an ally of Vice President George Bush in his bid to succeed Reagan. It was through Bush that Baker became involved in politics, and he managed his friend's 1980 presidential campaign. If Bush should get stopped for the nomination, though, then Baker might emerge as a dark-horse contender in the event of a convention deadlock. A more likely prospect is that Baker could be in the running for the vice presidency.

With his experience as a White House executive and Cabinet secretary, his conservative pragmatism and his Texas political base, Baker could bring balance to a Republican ticket headed by Rep. Jack Kemp of New York, Gov. James Thompson, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole of Kansas or former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker of Tennessee. By choosing a ticket of Baker & Baker, the Republicans could save money in printing up bumper strips and campaign buttons. Unlike the ticket of Dole & Dole, with the Kansas senator's wife, Secretary of Transportation Elizabeth Dole, for the vice presidency, which some Republicans have been promoting, the Baker & Baker combination wouldn't be vulnerable to charges of nepotism.